

LIBERIA

One Hundred and Twenty Nine Million US Dollar National Budget In Whose Interest? Government Officials or Ordinary People...

*A Reflection on What the Executive Hid; And
What the Legislature Glossed over; And What
the Civil Society Kept Quiet About*

I. Introduction

In keeping with statutory requirement, the Government of President Ellen Johnson between May and June 2006 presented the national budget for the period July 1, 2006 - June 30, 2007 to the National Legislature for approval. After weeks of legislative rumblings, frantic lobby and heated debate on the budget, the Legislature finally gave its procedural approbation thus empowering the executive with the authority to begin executing the budget.

The public budget, as it ought to be, is a reflection of the Liberian government's political, economic and social policies in their order of priority to the government. In other words, the budget manifests whether the government's position and/or commitment to addressing poverty, social injustice and meeting its international human rights obligation take priority or whether spending on official luxury is prioritized.

The current budget, as it stands, has come to be acknowledged as the most significant and singularly most important economic policy document of the Johnson-Sirleaf's government six months after it came to power. No doubt, critical tradeoffs were carved on how money should be raised and spent. At least from the perspective of the government, the budget reflects the "true social and economic policy priorities" which inevitably supports (not contrast) President Johnson-Sirleaf's promises, slogans, goals, commitment and policies articulated in a bid for the highest seat. But is this the reality in the current budget?

This article will seek to explore whether the current national budget, as it ought to be, is supportive of poverty-reduction – giving support to programs that benefit the poor with the maximum use of available resources. Does the budget fulfill or negate the government national and international human rights obligation; does it emphasize service to the nation and people or it prioritizes service to private pockets? While the current budget clearly identified what the government wants to do, does it, at the same time justify what the government ought to do? Our attempt here is to use the "lenses" of human rights, which places the welfare of the people (especially vulnerable and

marginalized people due to their weak and poor position) at the center stage in the budgetary process to examine whether or not the budget is in the interest of officials or the downtrodden.

II. Inside the Budget: Official Benefits Vs. Civil Servants' Benefits

Undoubtedly, labor is a critical constituent element of state growth, development and stability. This explains why governments usually do not appreciate discontent among its labor force. When the labor force “goes slow”, “strikes” or “marches in the street”, government becomes momentarily paralyzed. In the context of this realization, governments have both moral and legal obligations to cater to the general welfare of its labor force by the provision of reasonable pay and decent working conditions. Relative to the Liberian experience, the wage level of civil servants is an ideal case for discussion. Comparing the wage level of civil servant to benefits that have been accrued or allotted to officials will constitute the focus of the discussion. But firstly, we must set out to discover who the ordinary Liberian civil servant is? what is his/her state of welfare, what are the controlling characteristic attributes?

- He/she generally lives below the poverty line of US\$1/day or less
- He/she is the only employed head of an average family size of six (6)
- He/she works for the Liberian government, which now agrees to pay him/her \$55.00 Liberian dollar (US\$1.00) for every day of the month excluding the 31st day.
- He/she is expected (presumably by the government) to perform magic and feed a an average family of six with about four cups of rice (costing LD\$40.00) with some soup kind - costing an average of LD\$100.00 each day from his/her LD\$55.00 earning
- He/she is expected (presumably by the government) to spend LD\$50 each day for transport cost from places like Paynesville, Bardnersville, Duala and “report to work on time and perform efficiently”, all from the same LD\$55.00/day earnings.
- He/she is left alone (presumably by the government) to send his/her illiterate kids to school at astronomically high cost around LD\$ 1,500 – LD\$4,000 in very poorly equipped public schools and around LD\$3,000 – LD\$15,000 in relatively equipped private schools, all from the same LD\$55.00 per day. Does he/she receive it on time?
- Because he/she needs to have place to stay, he/she must rent one or two rooms for the family at a cost of LD\$500 – LD\$1500 per month from his/her same monthly salary of LD\$55 x 30 days = LD\$1650.00; and the list could go on.
- In essence, he/she is the least considered in the budget with a pity-soaked salary of US\$30 (LD\$1650.00 @ the rate of 55.

Having identified who the civil servant is, it is important to set out in exploring what forces; both executive and legislative, that have conspired to keep the civil servant as that “other half which needs to die a gradual emotional and psychological death” while living without life. In so doing, attention will be focused on salaries/allowances (coined Special Allowance 1979 -2007) for officials of the Executive Branch and members of the National Legislature in the 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 budgets on the one hand and salaries for civil servants in the same budgets on the other hand. Comparison will be made to salaries/allowances to all sides in the 2006/2007 budget.

Table A: Minimum Salary Per month (coined Special Allowance between 2005 – 2007)

	1978/79	1979/80	1980/81	2006/2007
The President (Special Allowance)	3000	3000	3000	6000
Vice President	NA	NA	NA	5000
Cabinet Minister	1,500	1,500	1,500	1500
Deputy	NA	NA	NA	1,000
Budget Director	-	-	-	1,500
Deputy				1,000
Legislators/Council men	900	900	1000	
Senators				2,950
Representatives				2,328
President Pro-temp	-	-	-	4000
Speaker (Special Allowance)				5000
Civil Servant salary	75	75	150	30

Table B: Additional Allowances for 12 months (Number of Persons Unknown), but certainly negligible as compared to allocation to civil servants

	2000 – 2001	2005/2006 ¹	Feb 1- Jun 30 ²	2006 - 2007 ³
Salary (President Office Staff)		42,654	56,734	20,492
General Allowance for Office Staff		-	-	84,900
Professionals – President’s Office		45,000	58,502	100,000.
Vice President Office		69,200	143,050	167,050
General Allowances – Office of the Speaker		92,000	91,200	68,000
General Allowances – Office of the President Pro-temp		-	56,676	56,676
Budget Bureau Allowances + Professional Fees + Overtime				213,476
Civil Servants		+ - 0	+ - 0	+ - 0

As candidly reflected in the table, successive national budgets between 1978 to 2006 have evidently served the interest of the governors while those who entrust their leaders with the power they wield seem not to be accommodated in the special consideration.

For instance, in a trend marking the period between 1978 – 1981, the president of the republic of Liberia received as special monthly allowance \$3,000.00 (Three Thousand United States Dollars). Worth noting and as a matter of critical concern is the dramatic

¹ Period before President Johnson Sirleaf’s Presidency

² Period during President Johnson Sirleaf’s Presidency

³ Period of President Johnson Sirleaf’s current budget

100% leap from \$3,000.00 to \$6,000.00 as Special Allowance for the president in the current 2006/2007 national budget.

Clearly, as portrayed in the table the Vice President, Speaker, President Pro-Tempore, senators, representatives, cabinet ministers and their deputies have assigned to themselves fabulous salaries and benefits while civil servants' salaries continue to highlight the increasing disparity between the 'big guns' and those who practically keep the wheels of government's bureaucracy functioning. This provokes a critical human rights issue in as much as it does not take into consideration fulfilling the fundamental question of equal work for equal pay situation.

Also, it has been observed that in addition to budgetary allocation placed at the disposal of the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs, there is a special budgetary allotment for staff within the president's office. Although it is not clearly defined as to which staff is specifically assigned to the president but there is lack of clarity as to who should be seen as working with the Ministry of State or the president's office exclusively. For presidential staffers within the office of the president alone \$20,492 has been set aside but there are unanswered questions about who gets what, why and how such expenditure is effected.

On the question of professional services in the office of the President, \$100,000 is allocated. What appears unclear is the inability of such allocation to attract a more transparent outlook on account of expenditure. At the same time, the President's office has a budget line intended to address general expenses to the tune of \$84,900.

The office of the Vice President has a total allocation of \$167,050 to account for, an allotment, which saw a leap from \$69,200 to \$143,050 between 2005/2006 and February – June 2006 for the Vice President's office. This allowance is in addition to the special allowance monthly of \$5,000 allotted for the Vice President.

In order of succession, the Speaker gets a general allowance of \$68,000 including his special monthly allowance; President Pro-Tempore - \$56,676; while the Budget Bureau's Allowance plus professional fees and overtime totaled \$213,476. In sharp contrast, civil servants who bear the brunt of major workload have been given no consideration in terms of special allowances or overtime. However, these civil servants are being made to survive barely on just \$30.00 monthly under extremely harsh realities.

There is certainly a huge gap between the \$30.00, for civil servants' salaries, which is further subjected to deductible tax cuts and the special and general allowances for the president, vice president, speaker, president pro-tempore, senators, representative, minister their deputies and directors state parastatals (See table C)

III. Education for the Poor and National Budget

Discrimination in education is as old as the republic itself since its founding in 1822 and independence in 1847. While inequality in access to education has dominated the national life of the country, national resource allocation have historically favoured the ruling elites, their dependents and associates

against the vast majority of indigenous stock⁴ most of whom fall in the national 80%⁵ abject poverty bracket.

Consequently, the number of street children has increased and is reaching alarming proportion. With a minimum wage of thirty dollars (US\$30.00) for civil servants, many children whose parents cannot afford the cost are denied access to education. Though an official of the Ministry of Education claims the figure could be higher, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said half of the country's children are out of school⁶. "We can safely say that six out of 10 Liberian children are out of school at the moment and this is because of the war that took place in this country."⁷

On review, Article six of the 1986 Liberian Constitution obliges the government to provide "access to educational opportunities and facilities for all citizens...". Additionally, both the Convention on the Rights of the Child - CRC (ratified) 1984 and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - ICESCR (ratified (2003) as well as the Universal Primary Education Law of Liberia (1970) and the Education Law of A.D. 2001 of Liberia (Section 2.3 & 2.4) demand that the government makes available and provides free and compulsory primary education to all its citizens. In recognition of existing laws, the political platform of the ruling Unity Party and the inaugural address of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf pledged to promote universal primary education. The "**free and compulsory**" primary education law will be accorded high priority and vigorously executed⁸

On the contrary, recent and contemporary historical realities in Liberia have proven that promises broken and/or betrayed have been given the citizens.

Even though, there is no ambiguity in Section 5.22 (i) of the Education Law of A.D. 2001 which states that "the Government of Liberia increases the budgetary allotment to the education sector to 25% of the total annual revenue outlay, the present government allotted only 7.99% of the national budget to the education sector in the July 2006 – June 2007 National Budget.

Education for All is not only a social need but a fundamental human right critical to the general welfare of the human person. It is against this background that the Liberian Government is obliged to prioritize education for all. As the Education Law of Liberia A. D. 2001 noted: "All citizens of Liberia shall have the right to basic education as a human right, and it shall entail all education up to the 9th Grade (JSS)..." This moral and legal

⁴ Interview with Ekena Wesley, Political Observer and Columnist, August 2006

⁵ UNDP estimate

⁶ MONROVIA, 1 Aug 2006 (IRIN). IRIN news.

⁷ IRIN's interview with an official of the Ministry of Education, July 2006

⁸ Unity Party Electoral Campaign Platform 2005

obligation finds expression in the magnificent words of the Liberian Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) to which Liberia is a party

From diagram 1 below, it is clear that Liberia is not only morally responsible but is also legally obligated to ensure that citizens enjoy education as a right with emphasis on the vulnerable and the poor.

Using the standards of the Liberia Education Sector Master Plan 2000 – 2010, it can be said that 55% of Liberia's population is of school age, "45% of which have no access to education"⁹. Overall illiteracy is put at 70% and unemployment at 80%. This means only 10% of the country's 55% population of school going age has access to education, even though not free and compulsory. War conditions have also compounded this problem to tragic proportions.

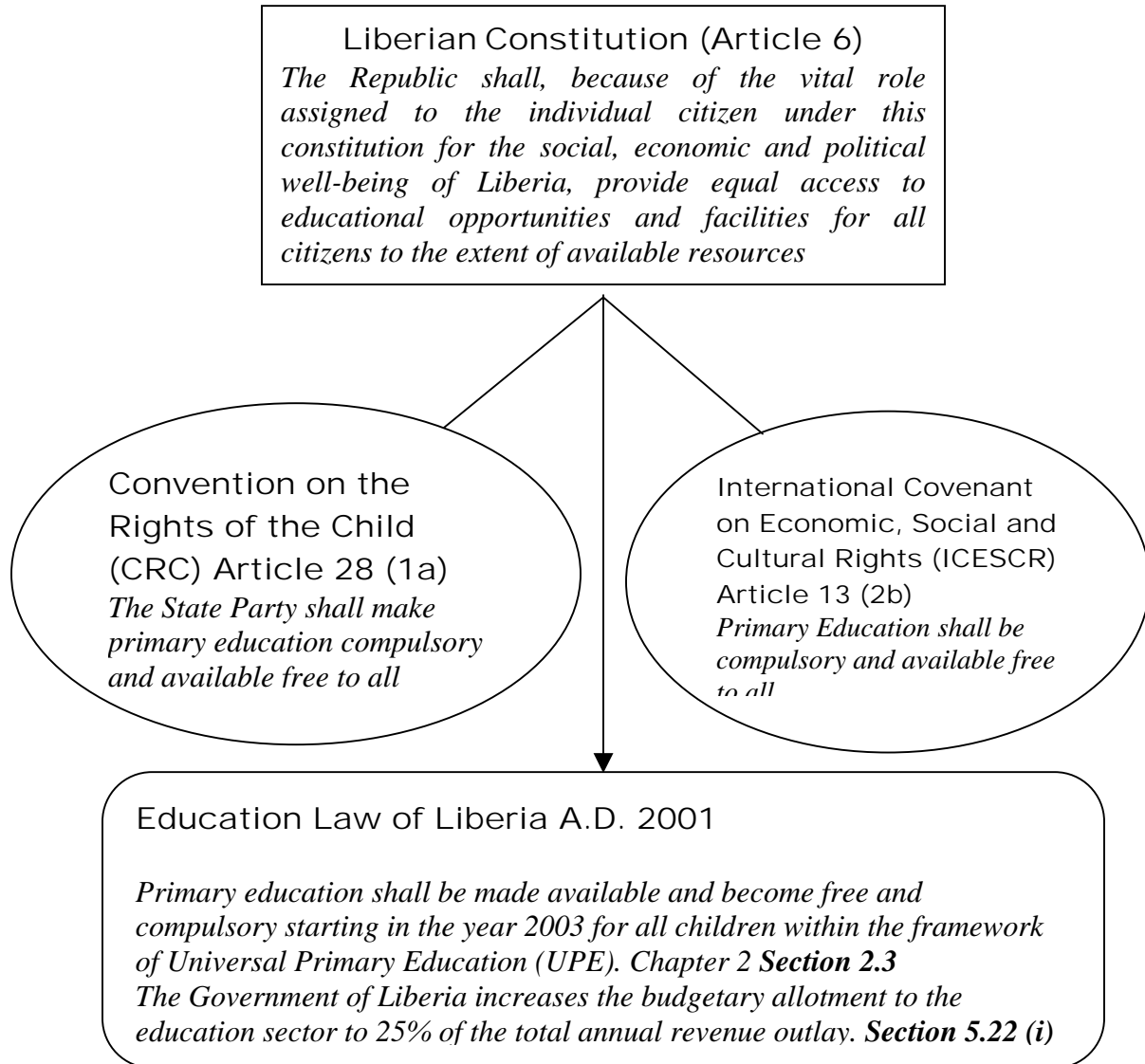
Having considered what the government obligation is under Liberian and international law compared to realities mentioned in the preceding paragraph, we will attempt now to discover whether or not the Liberian government is fulfilling its international human rights obligation as required and provided for in Article 2 (1) of the ICESCR:

1. Achieve progressively the full realization of the rights [to education].
Meaning that the government must take steps to move towards the fulfilment of the right to education. They MUST not take steps backwards in providing for education. The government of Liberia must be able to show progress in that direction
2. Maximum use of its available resources. This means that the Government must prioritize allocation of resources to necessary services

Within the context of explaining the above, it must be understood that the ICESCR also obligates governments (including Liberia) that ratify it to respect, protect and fulfil the rights enumerated, including the right to education. Fulfil means that the Liberian Government has a duty to take appropriate measures to ensure that the right to education is attained.

⁹ P. iv, Para. 1.7 of the Liberia Education Sector Master Plan 2000 – 2010, May AD 2000

Diagram 1. Legal instrument binding Liberia



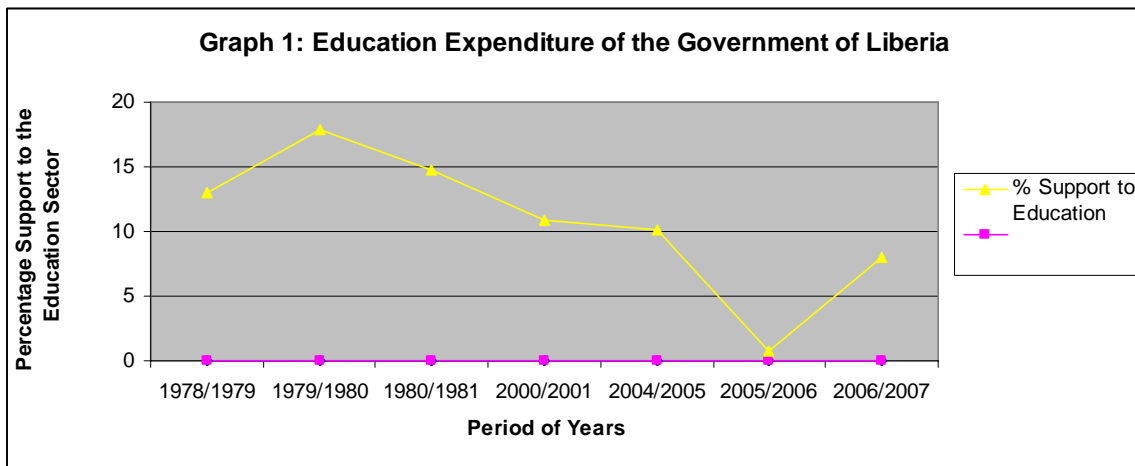
The Millennium Development Goals
Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

Ensure that children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary education

Using the Government's human rights obligations as yardstick, the Following analysis evolves:

A. Progressive Realization of the right to Education

By explanation of article 2 of the ICESCR, it is the explicit duty of Liberia to take deliberate steps toward the realization of the right to education, which means that the Liberian Government ought not to regress from levels of fulfillment previously achieved. By Progressive achievement, it means the government upward action taken over a period of years relative to the right to education. That is comparing the resources allocated to the educational sector over a period of time.



Sources: National budgets of Liberia

The graph above shows that the government's commitment to the educational sector over the years has not benefited from progressive realization. While the government net 17% in 1981, it came to an appalling 0.8% in '05/'06 recast budget 7.99% in 2006/2007 annual budget.

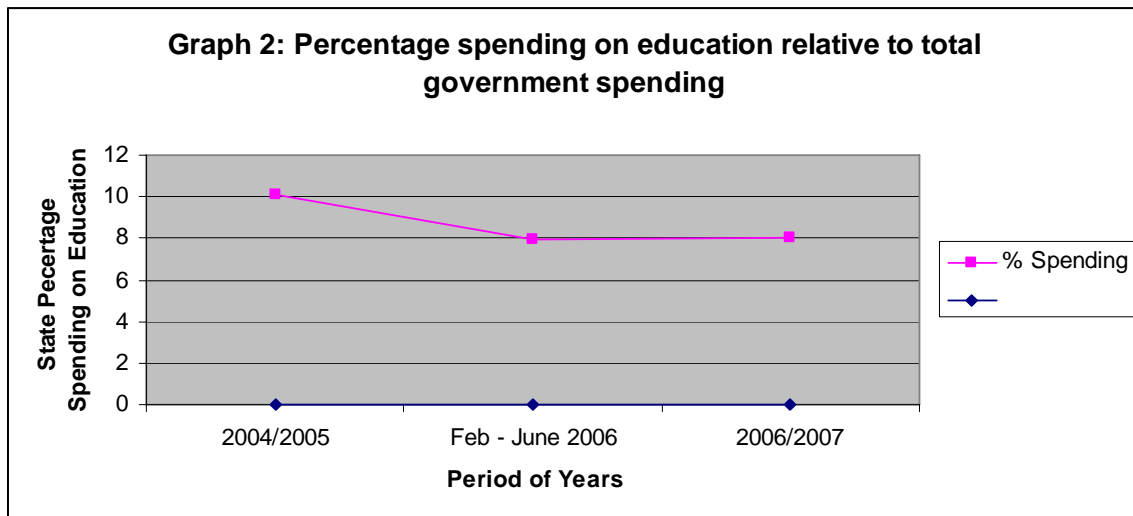
B. Full use of maximum available resources

The government of Liberia is under legal obligation to demonstrate that it is using the maximum of available resources. In budgetary terms, it requires the government to prioritize the allocation of resources to necessary services in order to guarantee the rights of citizens to education.

Realizing however, that it is an established fact that the government is faced with a permanent situation of insufficient resources leading to the condition that the government is not able to increase spending adequately in various priority areas at the same time, two options are available to gauge whether the government is in compliance with her international obligation to make maximum use of available resources.

B.1 Comparison with the Total Government Spending

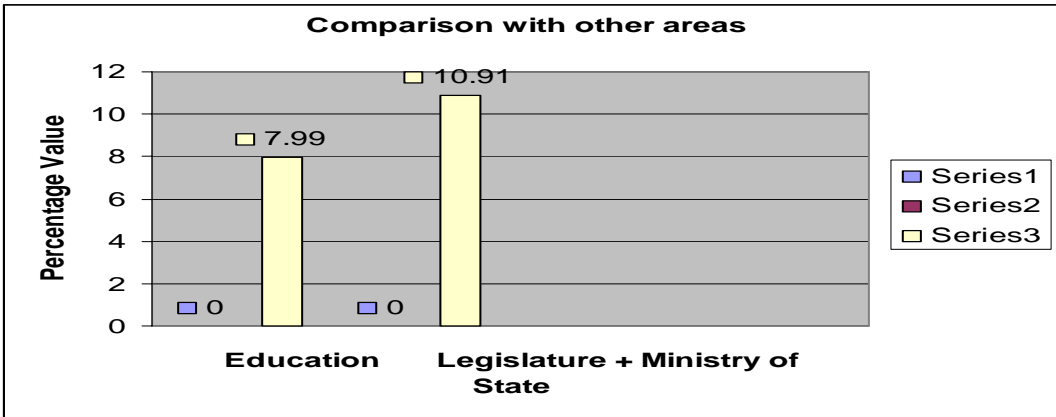
Contrasting total educational spending (in the current case, educational allocation) with the Total Government Spending (TGS) will help us evaluate whether or not the state resources are prioritized towards the fulfillment of the right to education.



Graph 2 shows that the Government has again decline in support to education relative to required 25% allocation to the education sector. While 10% was allocated to the educational sector in the 2004/2005 budget, the government only allocated 7.9% in the 2006 and 2007 respectively. This trend proves that the maximum of available resources has not been spent on the sector.

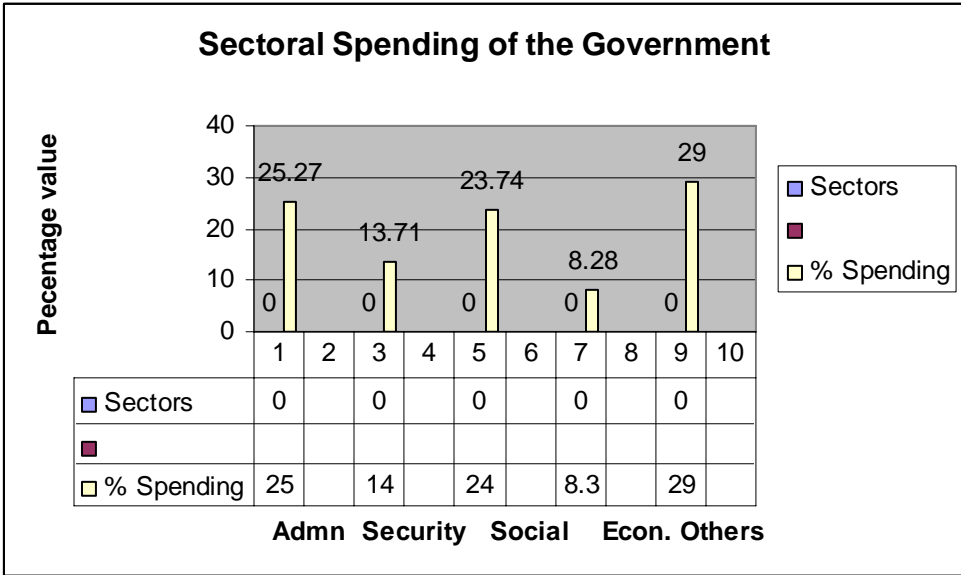
B.2 Comparison with other areas of spending

In this instance, we will compare government spending on education with other non-economic and social rights areas.



Graph 3: Shows the spending on the National Legislature and the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs including the office of the President account for about 11% while education for the entire country is about 8%.

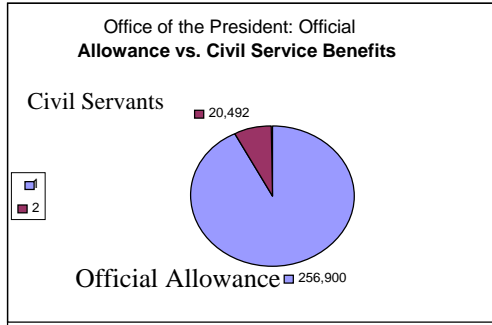
B. 3 Comparative Analysis of Government Spending by Sector
Graph 4



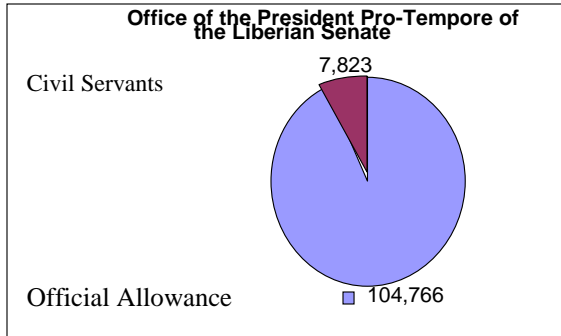
Graph 5 shows that security, social and economic sectors that are likely to benefit people have least percentage than the General Administrative Sectors and “others” for official benefit to a larger extent.

I. Official Allowances and Civil Servants' Benefits

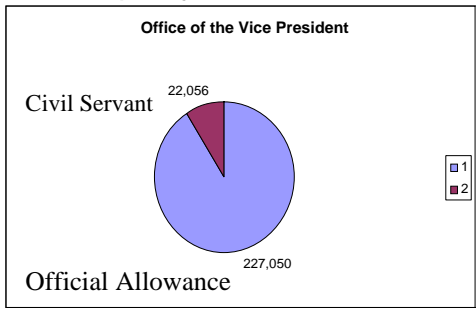
Graph 5: Headed by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President



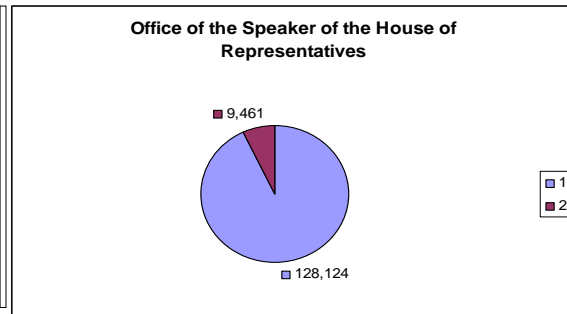
Graph 6 : Headed by Hon. Iseac Nyenabo



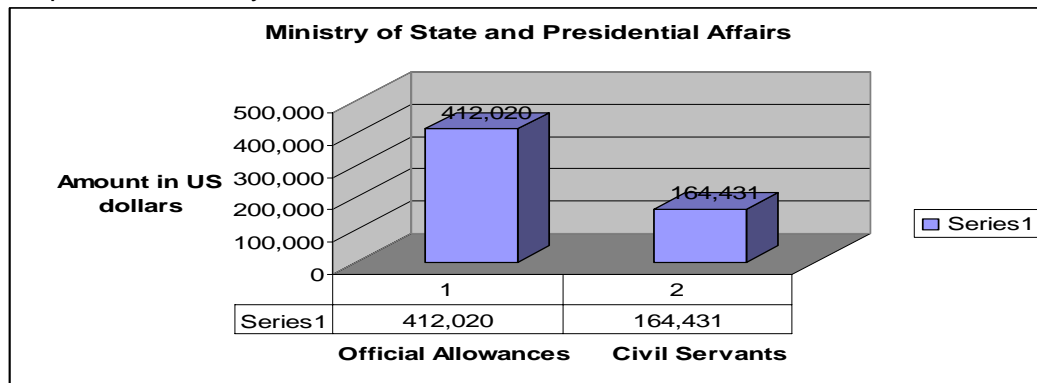
Graph 7: Headed by H.E. Joseph Nyumah Boakai



Graph 8: Headed by Hon. Edwin Melvin Snowe

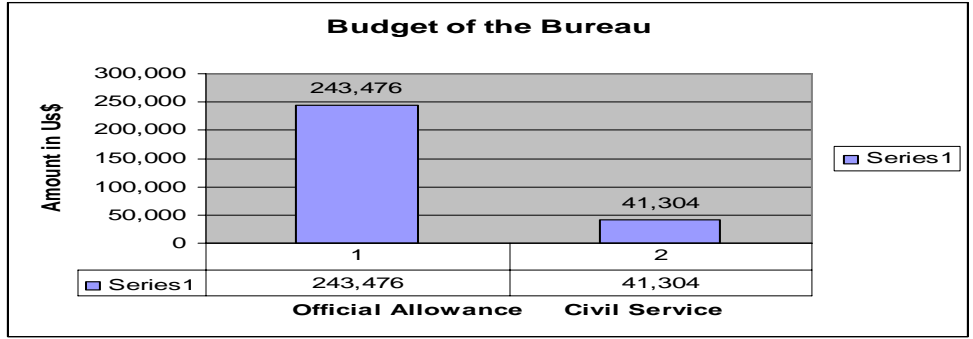


Graph 9. Headed by Willis F.D. Knuckles



Graph 9 shows that US\$412,020 is allocated for official allowances while US\$164,431 is allocated for salaries for civil servants. It can be expected that a lot of these civil servants are supporters, friends and relatives of the president.

Graph 10: Headed by Augustine Ngafuan



Principal Government Officials

Position/Name	Salary per month	Civil Servant Salary
President--Ellen Johnson Sirleaf	\$6,000.00	\$30.00
Vice President--Joseph Nyumah Boakai	\$5,000.00	\$30.00
House Speaker --Edwin Melvin Snowe	\$5,000.00	\$30.00
Chief Justice Johnnie N. Lewis		
Min. F. Affairs		
George W. Wallace	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Min. of Finance--Antoinette Sayeh	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Min of Justice		
Frances Johnson Morris	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Defense		
Brownie Samukai	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Ministe Post and Telecom.		
Jackson E. Doe	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Internal Affairs		
Ambulai Johnson	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Education Joseph Korto	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Public Works		
Willis F.D. Knuckles	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Agriculture		
Christopher Toe	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Health and Social Welfare		
Walter Gwenigale	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Commerce and Industry		
Bankie King-Akinrele	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism--Johnny McClain	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs--Toga Gaywea McIntosh	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of State and Chief of Staff--Morris Dukuly	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Minister of Land, Mines and		

Energy--Eugene Shannon Minister of Labor	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Samuel Kofi Woods Minister of Youth and Sports	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Jamesetta H. Wolokollie Minister of Gender and Development	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Varbah Gayflor Chairman, National Investment Commission	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Richard Tolbert Director, Bureau of the Budget	\$1,500.00	\$30.00
Augustine Ngafua Director General, General Service Agency--Willard Russell	\$1,500.00	\$30.00

II. President Johnson Sirleaf's Pro-People Promises vs. Anti-People Budget

If political promises are anything one can go by to judge the political maturity of a leader, then Liberia's President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf ranks highest. From her pledge to fight poverty and heal the broken heartedness of starving families through the famous "papa na come" slogan to her Unity Party' campaign platitudes of pursuing free and compulsory primary education, revamping the security sector, providing more jobs, the platitude of mouth watering promises are enticing. In her inaugural address, she remarked:

To all my citizens "...I want to speak directly to you. As you know, in our various communities and towns, our children have a way of greeting their fathers when they come home after a long, tiring day of trying to find the means to feed the family that night and send the children to school the next day. They say, 'Papa na come.'

Well, too many times, for too many families, papa comes home with nothing, having failed to find a job or to get the help to feed the hungry children. Imagine then the disappointment and the hurt in the mother and children; the frustration and the loss of self-confidence in the father.

Through the message of this story, I want you to know that I understand what you, our ordinary citizens, go through each day to make ends meet for yourselves and for your families

*Times were hard before, Times are even harder today. But I make this pledge to you: **Under my Administration, we will work hard to change the situation. We will work to ensure that when our children say "papa na come", papa will come home joyfully with something, no matter how meager, to sustain his family. In other words, we will create the jobs for our mothers and fathers to be gainfully employed...*** (H.E. Ellen Johnson Sireleaf, January 2006)

Ironically, recent and contemporary realities in Liberia clearly show a growing trend in the opposite direction. The situation is dreadfully approaching explosive limits that economic students at the University of Liberia have jokingly coined an equation to reflect bad domestic policies of the government:

Downsizing + rightsizing + Low Income divided by unemployment = PAPA WILL NOT COME

Still arguing, the students claim: ***The marginal benefit derived thereof is the in-sizing of the few ups and more suffering for the masses which makes papa will not come.***

This reality, as it unfold, was captured in a March 2006 position statement of the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy:

"In less than three months of the existence of the Ellen Johnson-led administration, hundreds of Liberians have lost their jobs, owing to massive layoff of civil servants perpetrated by heads of certain public agencies. Notable, if not notorious, in the mass dismissal euphoria is the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN), where the new Commission, Chris Massaquoi, axed out 396 officers for "ineffectiveness at BIN." Accordingly, "26 officers are disqualified for long service and age retirement, 13 officers fired for internal matters, three officers for being physically incapable," amongst other reasons for dismissal. At the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation (NASSCORP), director-general Francis Kabbah, has reportedly dismissed twenty-eight employees, vowing to effect major restructuring and adjustment of staffs at that public parastatal.

In the last few days, Managing Director Harris Greaves has been in tough words with several staffers over his plans to retrench a sizable number of employees at the Liberia Petroleum Refining Company (LPRC).

In addition to the dismissal spree which has embroiled almost every government ministry and agency, there also hovers a wave of threats of dismissals over many more civil servants. Hundreds of employees at the Ministry of Finance, for instance, are still edgy and working under the state of trepidations in the wake of threats by Minister Antoinette Saryeh to retrench them for various reasons best known to herself.

Public apprehension and doubt as to whether President Sirleaf acquiesces the massive uprooting of civil servants is allayed by the fact that the Executive Mansion pioneered it all when it announced the putting down of a few hundred employees following a "screening" process to determine each employee's status within the framework of civil service rules. The Executive Mansion pronouncement broke grounds and opened the floodgates for what is dubbed as Civil Service Exodus.

Again the President is on record for promising a major civil service reform, including the reduction of the number of civil servants in the country. Madam Sirleaf, speaking at a forum during her recent visit to the United States of America, stressed that civil service reform in Liberia was imperative, chuckling, "In fact we wanted to create a Ministry of Do-Nothing for those who are doing nothing in the government and being paid."

While hundreds of civil servants bath in the ocean of dismissal or threats of dismissal, thousands of heads of security personnel, or former security personnel, are rolling as the Security Sector Reform agenda picks up steams. According to statistics, subject to confirmation, over two thousand former soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia, are laid off under the army restructuring exercise. In fact over 200 Liberians who were working with the Ministry of Defense have since being laid off. That figure adds to tens of other Liberian security personnel from other state security agencies undergoing restructuring.

The Ellen Johnson Government and its partners involved in the army and bureaucracy reform crusade are seemed to be opting for the digitizing, humanizing and educationalizing of Government service. That is probably why civil servants of retirement age, low academic credentials and human rights

Table C: Additional Annual Benefits for Government Officials Vs. Civil Servants

Description	President Sirleaf	Vice President Boakai	Speaker Snowe	Pres. Protempore Nyenabo	Members of the Senate	Members of the House of Representatives	Civil Servant
Fuel & Lubricants for vehicles	169,200	93,966	12,000	22,000	169,649	353,772	0
Fuel & Lubricants (Generator)		42,644	12,000	26,400	95,000	95,000	0
Vehicles Servicing and Maintenance	30,000	19,584	11,520	4,500	65,000	130,000	0
Vehicles Insurance and Utility					700		0
Other Transport Expenses					313,200	684,000	0
Office Materials and services	40,000	6,000	7,500	10,000	20,000	48,000	0
Cleaning Materials and Services						20,000	0
Printing & Publication Services	56,000		7,000	3,000	30,000	40,000	0
Rentals and Lease			12,000				
Telephone\, Fax, E-Mail Providers		7,792	6,000	6,000	41,800	75,900	0
Domestic Travel	165,000	24,000	6,000	6,000	34,800	71,000	0
Foreign Travel	600,000	12,000	25,000	25,000	200,000	364,908	0
Routine Repairs and Maintenance-Equipment						6,000	0

Contained in this table reflecting the budget are volumes of contradictions and glaring political conspiracy against multitude of the country's indigents. Amazing to note in the budget is the separate provisions for fuel and lubricants for office of the Speaker of House of Representatives, US\$12,000.00; fuel and lubricants for generator for the President Pro-Tempore, US\$26,400; fuel and lubricants for generator for the Senate, US\$95,000.00 and US\$95,000.00 for the members of the lower house for the same purpose, when all of them are supplied from the same source of electricity. All these exclude allowances for members of the Senate and House of Representatives.